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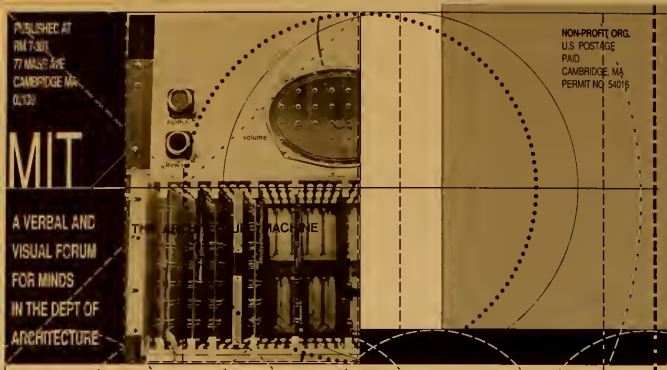
A VERBAL AND
VISUAL FORUM
FOR MINDS
IN THE DEPT OF
ARCHITECTURE



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THRESH

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ARCHITECTURE AND PROPENSITIES

by Stanford Anderson

In the fall of 1991, Harvard's Graduate School of Design held a symposium on the teaching of history of architecture in schools of architecture. Toward the end of the day, a brief but searching exchange between two architects confronted current problems of historical and theoretical discussion of architecture. Most of those present, including the two architects, agreed that architecture must be located within the social and political contexts of which they are a part. But how? Not in a vulgar Marxism that treats architecture as a mere epiphenomenon, fully circumscribed by its infrastructural base. Nor in any other form of social determinism that accounts for architecture wholly by forces external to it. Still more implausible is an architectural determinism in which it is the physical environment that causes the social behavior.

How could one avoid both these poles without finding oneself supporting a view of architecture as autonomous—without, that is, embracing architecture as an abstract game, however beautiful and/or challenging that game might be? The discussants wished to lose neither the social dimension of architecture nor a sense of the integrity and internal structure of architecture. But how? It was the end of the day and the chairman ended the symposium with a rather despairing dilemma hanging in the air.

I propose that examination of the propensities of both place and inhabitation can occupy the space of that dilemma, and offer some illumination.

The tradition of Architecture at MIT is to be concerned with people and the environment. In a concern for "people-environment," our attention is drawn neither to people nor to the environment alone, but to situations. These situations do not yield to deterministic, causal analyses, yet they are possessed of certain tendencies, leanings, inclinations, proclivities—certain propensities. There is a propensity for a situation to unfold in some way. But our experience also tells us how complex is every situation—that both the actors and the setting have propensities, and the dynamic of these interacting propensities cannot be completely foreseen. The situation is not determined. Yet it is also not the case that "anything goes." There are zero propensities: conditions that will not appear in the given circumstances. And the operative propensities do privilege some possible outcomes over others. For those of us with a particular concern for the physical environment, it is of interest to inquire into the propensities of artifacts, even as we acknowledge that they can only be known in the larger constructs of "situations."

View of Savannah, engraving by Peter Gordon (1734)

At this juncture I would wish to present a concrete example of the propensities of an environment operating over time in complex situations. It is this which has motivated my studies of Savannah* which can only be sketched here.

The 1733 founding of Savannah was the centerpiece of a colony at the southern frontier of English settlement in North America. Physical characteristics of the site establish certain conditions that serve and shape the propensities for its use: a river navigable by ocean-going ships, a bluff establishing flat high ground above the river, containment to east and west by small streams, and the potential for extension to the south.

The plan that was set down on this bluff establishes a much more specific field of propensities. As the Peter Gordon engraving showing the state of Savannah in 1734 indicates, the city plan is composed of repeated, approximately square modules called "wards." Four wards were set out in the first year, shortly to be increased to six, and then more.

The repetitive module of the Savannah plan has a high degree of internal complexity. It has three types of blocks which can be further differentiated by their orientations. At a minimum one recognizes six different street types. The addition of wards yields still further complexity. Since half the residential lots face inward and half outward, there are simultaneous centripetal and centrifugal forces, indeed it is only the lots that face outward that are reinforced by similar uses across the east-west streets that bound the wards. The continuity of the boundary streets only emerges as a major factor as one attends to the larger pattern. Similarly the redundancy of east-west streets makes all those internal to the ward relatively insignificant even though they do possess continuity.

The plan of Savannah adds many new physical characteristics to those of the site itself, and thus establishes more, and more specific, conditions that further serve and shape the propensities for its use. I would like to speak of a field of propensities, understanding by this not just the physical plan, but also its inhabitation: the relation of physical place and inhabitation.

These are rudimentary observations on the plan and built form of Savannah. I must be even more peremptory in asserting that this plan has been influential, usually positively, in shaping the use and communal understanding of this city: relations of public and private uses, locations of communal, commercial and residential occupancy, ordering of vehicular and pedestrian circulation, setting the spaces of ceremony and memory, maintenance of the historic fabric, and more. I would emphasize that this story is composed largely of unforeseen events and also of unforeseen propensities of the artifact. Environments should be, and usually are, richer than the intentions that bring them into existence.

Analyses such as these can be made of any city,

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From the Editors . . .

In his essay "Architecture and Propensities," Stanford Anderson writes "each of us must constantly take positions that imply larger commitments. We must make conjectures on which to act as we examine and question them." Fundamentally, he claims, each of us must take the risk of being wrong. This issue of *Threshholds*, the first of a two part series, examines the question of continuity and change in design education at MIT. The recent samizdat-like circulation of Michael Sorkin's 1984 M.Arch. thesis, "Some Impressions of the Department," which questioned the "observations" of Maurice Smith's built form and the school's didactic and physical environment, is but one of the more vivid responses by students to new faculty hirings, curriculum restructuring, and the recent appointment of Dean Mitchell. Mitchell's "Studio of the Future" (by some accounts akin to Tuttle Commercialization's Edison project), has been the source of some question and debate. Annie Pedret and Amin Ahmad examine Smith's oeuvre, a chief source of intellectual ballast in the department. The feature "Leading Indicators" consists of statements from faculty and students about what positions are viable in the context of future planning and the intellectual habits of the school. "Fingers in the Wind," by Ellen Dunham-Jones also surveys the prospect of architectural education in the context of recent theoretical articulations. The editors ask, "Is there a storm brewing on the horizon?"

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1994

Fingers in the Wind

by Ellen Dunham-Jones

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The approaching millennium finds architects with their fingers to the wind. Confused by the storms of debate which have rolled through the discipline since the collapse of confidence in both modernism and modernity, anxious antennae search for signs of emerging consensus on a design agenda. Relative to the impassioned breast-beating of recent years, we appear to have entered a pre-millennial lull in architectural news making. Is this simply a pause as the players regroup and gather momentum for the inevitable declarations of new directions for the new century? Or have architects—so full of self-importance and the promise of social change and radical technological breakthroughs at the dawn of the century—simply run out of conviction?

The lack of polemics cannot simply be correlated to the recession and the lack of work. Recessions in fact are often useful times for speculation and research that is not possible when the workday is full. Postmodernism's premature bloom in the 1970s grew in part out of the efforts of Michael Graves, Robert A.M. Stern, Robert Venturi, et al to do more with their frustratingly small commissions during the recession of the early part of the decade. The contemporary Moscow architects Brodsky & Utkin's visionary paper projects, like those of their constructivist compatriots earlier in the century, similarly demonstrate how difficult economic times can lead to forceful critiques of the status quo and dramatic counter proposals. Yet, like so many contemporary voices for change, it is more clear what they stand against rather than what they stand for.

As both witnesses to and active consumers of the media-spawned and market-driven parade of architectural fashions and fashionable theories, architects have become shell shocked by the pace of change. The current lull is perhaps explained by a weariness with new directions, a cynicism regarding the ability of any new movement to live up to its promises (for that matter, a cynicism over architecture's cultural significance, period). Listening to academics and architects expound their latest theories has become like listening to politicians campaigning for votes. Their enthusiasm can be seductive, but past experience tells us not to have high expectations for their accomplishments.

What is particularly unusual about the current moment is that rather than the dominant theoretical positions/design movement being replaced by a "new and improved" theory, as postmodernism replaced modernism, and deconstruction/deconstructivism replaced postmodernism, nothing particularly strong has replaced "decon"—it has simply fizzled. In the televisual age of shortened attention spans, decon's stylistic preference for acute angles and decentered compositions lingers but most of its recent devotees now distance their work from the "D" word. In his lecture at the GSD last fall even Peter Eisenman refuted any continued interest in post-structuralism. The fallout from Decon's waning prominence nonetheless contributes to the general Tafuri-esque skepticism towards architecture's effectiveness at influencing progressive cultural behavior.

Drawing upon Georges Bataille's writings, Bernard Tschumi identifies architecture with the establishment of constraints on individual freedom. Walls, ordered spaces and attempts at planning inevitably impose limitations. Both Rem Koolhaas and Tschumi have proposed a need for an anti-architecture. Random juxtapositions in their work presumably are less restricting and allow for subjective interpretations of meaning and use, and hence are liberative. Their equation of architecture with order and constraint, and randomness with freedom—besides raising serious questions as to the very nature of such supposed freedom—challenges the very existence of the profession and reflects the crisis of confidence of many architects today.

It is not by accident that at the same time the agenda of architectural design has foundered, interest in architectural theory and criticism has boomed. This is in keeping with the "economic recession leads to speculation" theory. However, the recent institutionalization of theory and criticism in Ph.D. programs has tended to result in the isolation of such speculative contemplation from design. In fact, it has even led to a degree of disdain for design and the privileging of interpretation as the more significant creative act. Beatriz Colomina's crediting of Aradne as the first architect instead of Daedalus is symptomatic of this shift. (Daedalus built the labyrinth, but Aradne's thread exposed its order.) Theory's institutional separation from design and its alliance with history has moved it from a realm of speculative projection into one of documentation and evaluation. Rather than theory serving as a lens, focusing architectural designers' intentions and promoting speculative design activity, theory has been increasingly conflated with criticism. Developing ever sharper scalpel-like tools with which to examine architectural work, critical theory tends to foreclose even untried strategies and in so doing, induce design paralysis.

Tantamount to this paralysis is the loss of a cultural agenda. The privatization of the public realm, the commodification of design, increasingly cheapened construction standards, increased liability and diminished control over large projects have left architects adrift, seemingly powerless and ineffective voices in cultural development. Traditionally, the architect's cultural role was to emplace a culture and its values in a particular environment. Architecture's ordering of space and movement between public and private space, and between the built and the natural landscapes either entrenched or challenged existing social hierarchies and political identities. However, not only has the ability of architects to emplace cultural values been eroded by the factors described above, but a far more diverse array of cultural values are now recognized than traditionally had been assumed. In determining a cultural agenda, architects not only have to determine how to emplace cultural values, they have to question just what those values are. Add to this the fact that television, computers, and other telecommunication technologies are globalizing culture, literally displacing it. Individual freedom today is defined more by access to the Internet or cable channels, than by wandering through randomly juxtaposed architectural spaces. Electronic access increasingly substitutes for physical access. As a place-based medium, architecture's significance in a placeless, post-industrial culture—to say nothing of its cultural agenda—is unclear.

The frenzied importation into architecture of other disciplines such as philosophy, literary criticism, linguistics, psychology, mathematics, etc. can be seen in retrospect as so many life-support systems hauled in to breathe relevance into an exhausted profession. After so much artificial stimulation the patient either remains comatose, dependent on outside support or wakes on its own. At issue is whether architecture's significance is best resuscitated by transforming the profession according to the external pressures increasingly brought to bear on it or whether architecture contributes more to culture by steadfastly concentrating on those issues more internal to the discipline. On the one hand, architects like Tschumi and Koolhaas have tried to metaphorically mimic post-industrial technologies by designing projects which are decentralized, dematerialized, televisual, and cyberspatial. On the other hand, architects like Rafael Moneo and Tadao Ando have concentrated on defining architecture in terms of its construction, tectonic presence, and engagement with place. By conceding technological superiority to television and computers they no longer try to maintain architecture's relevance to culture by zeitgeist inspired arguments, but rather find an agenda in trying to have architecture do what television and computers don't connect us to the earth and to each other. Moneo presented his newly completed art museum at Wellesley as a formal response to the site, program, circulation, light, and construction. Such a back-to-basics approach doesn't make headlines but it does ground architecture's agenda in building well. Relative to the radical pendulum swings of recent design trends, perhaps the seeming lull can be read as the stabilization of the pendulum around core environmental and architectural issues. If taken literally, fingers to the wind may not be such a bad strategy after all. More attention to the meteorological climate than the design climate could provide architects with the agenda needed to restart their course through changing conditions. ■

Equitable Building Portland, Oregon (1947)

In Memoriam, Pietro Belluschi 1899 –1994

Pietro Belluschi, master architect and dean of MIT's School of Architecture and Planning from 1951–1965, died on February 14 at his home in Portland, Oregon He was 94

Belluschi was born of the generation of European masters that included Josep Lluis Sert, Marcel Breuer, Louis Kahn, and Walter Gropius, that acclimatized modernist architecture in America Indeed, with Gordon Bunshaft and Bruce Graham he was among the principal poets of the rational post-war corporate architecture in a American modernist idiom ready for re-export to its native lands. Belluschi first worked for the prominent Portland, Oregon architect Albert Doyle, becoming his chief designer and taking over the firm in 1943. There he produced his masterpiece, the Equitable Building (1947) The elegant glass and aluminum tower (its curtain wall system preceded Bunshaft's Lever house by five years) gave refined expression to the tower's structural grid Before coming to MIT in 1951, Belluschi sold his firm to S O M with whom he would frequently collaborate in later years At MIT Belluschi was responsible for strengthening the Urban Studies and Planning Department, adding a Ph.D. program in planning in 1958, and founding, with Harvard, the Joint Center for Urban Studies As dean, Belluschi attracted a variety of architecture luminaries as critics, lecturers, and visiting scholars

Belluschi continued his busy architecture practice while he was dean His notorious Pan Am building on Park Avenue, New York (1962) aroused the ire of the architectural community and the city at large for its immense size and monotonous facade The building, designed in collaboration with Walter Gropius and Emery Roth & Sons, is testament to the bureaucratic anonymity to which modernist corporate architecture had risen by this date Belluschi's numerous designs for religious and cultural buildings on the west coast betray a sensitivity to the environment and a deftness with materials. Other works by Belluschi included an ensemble of buildings conceived with fellow MIT professor Eduardo Catalano The Juilliard School and Alice Tully Hall in New York City (1968) returned to the elegant massing and geometry and the use of rich materials of his earlier work. However, Lincoln Center, planned by Robert Moses on the site of a working class neighborhood (other buildings in the complex were designed by Philip Johnson), have been criticized for being white boxes placed on an modernist urban fabula rasa. —E E

PAGE THREE

A-form-isms: The Workings of Maurice Smith

by Annie Pedret

According to Maurice Smith he does not write, he does not theorize, but he "recognizes facts." In a recent conversation with Smith he merely verbalized ideas about form. For Smith the discussion of form constitutes a meditation about "intrinsic attributes and systems of organization." The question for Smith is not what form is, or how it is generated, but "what is reasonable," and more precisely, "what is reasonable for architecture." One can deduce that what is reasonable for Smith is what he calls form-language

Smith's writings are easily misleading if one assumes that they represent a body of work produced in order to explain, clarify, or disseminate the particulartes of his thinking He answers the question "why do you write?" by saying that he doesn't, he claims that he was "pressured" by former students into writing the few published articles that exist, and he clarifies that "Fragments of theory/practice," — a photocopied and cerlox bound collection of published writings, interviews, and notes — was initiated by a student several years ago This anthology continues to be produced by students and distributed within the confines of Maurice's workshop and studios. When queried as to why his writing is not disseminated beyond this domain, he answers, "why should it?" According to Maurice it is "tough" that his course descriptions are difficult to read and it doesn't matter if everything cannot be understood He explains that these descriptions merely function as an invitation and that they are more fully explained with slides during the studio presentations, and even further revealed in his workshops and studios When pressed about why his writing is so obscure Maurice counters that it is not It is just that the material is not simplistic Of the complexity of the material, however, there is no doubt Smith's apparent disinterest in writing and in the production of "Fragments" is not seamless however, since he periodically gives students pieces to add to the already 124-page collection His theory cannot be understood from his writing, and he considers his few built projects to be examples of what he verbalizes. Smith's writings are not an explanation of his theory, nor is he trying to explain, like Louis Kahn in his writings, the design process to himself

"Fragments" must be understood as a coherent entity integrated within a larger time/space continuum There are no separations for Smith between his teaching, built work, writings, and life - a life that he describes as being "coming and going." It is all part of a "field" that he calls his life The nature of that field is fractal, and thus it is not erroneous to assign a fractal nature to his writings As a fractal the writing can then tell us something about the rest of Smith's theoretical enterprise The first obvious feature of Smith's writing is that it is not structured as discourse but as apposition It is written in the form of precise dense, and highly charged word-diagrams or aphorisms. Words are stacked upon one another, divided by lines, separated by slashes / (enclosed in parenthesis) and, wherever possible, collaged together These strategies encourage word substitution and alternative readings that inhibit logical and linear comprehension He uses <<quotation marks,>> italics and, CAPITALIZED LETTERS as a graphic means of emphasis. The text is difficult to understand because the terminology that he uses is not defined for example, on a sheet entitled "TRANSFORMATIONS continuities LanguaGE behaveR " under the heading " DIAGRAMS of SELF-STABILITIES" we find the term "LATERAL displacement EXCHANGE Reciprocity/ (in directional field - REGISTERED " The material is organized and we get a sense that it opens up new ways of looking at and generating form, but it is incomprehensible Defining words and clarifying meaning are anathema to Smith The writing takes the form of what Maurice refers to as a "friendly collage"—that is, an assemblage of "recognitions" the participants of which can be read separately, but which, when they come together, affect one another Even in talking with Maurice, meaning is impossible to access logically since his communication seems to rely on the concept of santal, the improvised conversation of Muslim poets, where logic, classification and Aristotelian taxonomy have no place

Without an understanding that "Fragments" is merely a piece within the totality of Smith's life/work it is easy to falsely assign influences Where do these forms and ideas come from? Although Smith refers twice to Olson's short essay Projective Verse (1950) as coming "closest, in the writings I know, to a right-feeling description of designing," he claims in fact that he took nothing from Olson. Instead he claims that Olson, among other people, had parallels with his own ideas Although he insists that he never met Olson or had anything to do with him the similarities with the philosophy expounded in Projective Verse run much deeper than Smith's obvious adoption of the notion that "every perception leads directly to the next." There are stunning

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The Smith House: Built Collage

by Amin Ahmad

Coming upon the suburban residence built by Maurice K Smith elicits emotions of disbelief and curiosity Within the context of the upper-class suburban development of Harvard, Massachusetts whose image is determinedly rural and utopian, the Smith house is an aberration While exhibiting all the expected formal characteristics of habitation—a front door, windows, roof, chimney—the house differs dramatically from the expected The assemblage of materials that comprises its built fabric combines an intricate wood framing system with material salvaged and collected over the years old doors and windows, discarded stone cuts, steel and timber columns and beams, glass shop windows, doorknobs and circuit boards, tiles and bottles, scraps of machinery, screens, signs

Smith's house began as a completed object—a standard wood-frame "Cape" house Ongoing construction since 1966 has dissolved all divisions between the old developer house and later interventions The house now consists of a main living space that is used all year round and an unheated portion that is unheated that serves as a workshop and storage space Apart from a cooking space and toilet, programmatic divisions between bedroom and living room are not evident in the layout of the house While the upper spaces of the house are more private, each zone of has a built-in range of options that determine degrees of privacy, as well as visual and physical connection to other parts of the house

The Smith house jars us into reconsidering our mental constructs of "high" and "low" culture through its use of materials taken from sectors of society that lay hidden beyond the bucolic confines of suburbia These sites include the scrap yards that contain the refuse of a constantly changing society and the industrial plants that embody mass production Smith's use of the debris of everyday life and his architectural transformation of it—thus transcending the original significance of the found object—demonstrates the inclusiveness and complexity generated by a collage method of design.[1]

Smith's findings from the scrapheaps of everyday life are used in combination with wood framing in order to re-valorize each salvaged element That is, they are not incorporated as picturesque commentary on a bygone world, but as architectural fact Salvaged windows of all shapes and sizes are transformed, instead of remaining mere framing devices mediating between inside and out, they are arranged into habitable zones These zones include form definitions at a variety of scales a ledge on which to place a vase, and places to sit and sleep The window starts reaching beyond its conventional definition and begins to take on a different range of possibilities When transparent the window is a connector, translucent it is a screen, opaque it defines space, colored it intensifies experience Windows appear within the house creating connections between zones, recreating the outdoors inside

In this manner of deployment the other materials of the built collage are expanded into systems (large span, smaller span, structural or self-supporting) Where the systems meet an intersification takes place thus creating a new range of options. a

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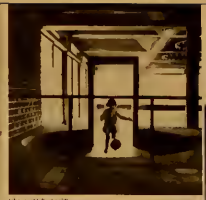
Smith House, Harvard Massachusetts (1966-)

(above, at left)
William Wurster, Dean of School of Architecture 1944—1950
Benner House Berkeley California (1943)

Lawrence Anderson, Instructor of Design 1933—; Head of Department of Architecture 1944—1967; Dean School of Architecture 1965–1971
MIT Swimming Pool (1940)



(above, at left, at right)
Aldo van Eyck, Visiting Professor 1960s
Orphanage, Amsterdam, Holland (1957–1960)

John Myer, Instructor of Design 1960–; Head of Department of Architecture 1988—1991
Boston Architectural Center (1965)

Imre Halasz, Instructor of Design 1957—
Don Bosco Technical High School, Boston (1975)

Leading Indicators

In schools of architecture the design studio is the integrating discipline It is where research and design interface, where the input from other disciplines is tested and transformed The success of this complex, reflective and creative process determines the quality of the school

There are two historically developed models for design teaching The first is based on the concept of the free, autonomous architect-artist, with an education typical in accademies of art centered around the figure and revelations of a charismatic master This concept produced corporate image-makers throughout the 20th century and still attracts students who understandably search for points of orientation that are best represented by a personality and a consistent oeuvre The second model replaces charisma with conscious reflection and aims at a design process that conceptualized models based on interdisciplinary research The synthetic qualities of this model that also includes the "art" aspects of architecture corresponds with the concept of the design studio as the place of integration This model also corresponds with recent changes in the profession towards smaller, flexible work units with the imagination to work on a range of tasks rather than centralized management dependent on specialized knowledge

Teachers in good architecture schools based on the second model (typical in technical universities) have been less successful designers than the masters of the first model But they educate students to be open to experimentation, not fixed on a formal grammar The qualities of design teacher in a school as roughly characterized here differ significantly from the traditional image of the autonomous artist

Regarding perception, the design teacher has to be sensitive to a large spectrum of political, social, cultural, scientific and technological issues On the level of analysis, the teacher has to be able to communicate his/her ideas with clarity and engagement The transparency of self-reflection is a necessary precondition for a critical participation of the students in the design process (here, the students have to find support in the history/theory disciplines) Finally on the level of the design proposal the material form will be the result of a reductive process where intuition plays an important role Therefore, a valid analysis itself is no guarantee for the quality of an architectural proposal The connection between the complexity of analysis and the simplicity of expression can only be presented to students as object of critical reflection if the teacher's position can be tested on the results of his/her design practice The practice of the teacher is also necessary to fully understand, interpret and to help developing the promise of a student's idea The reality of the school and its administration, however, require a careful balance of the openness to the outside and the forces of coherence

This is a concept still probably too general to serve as a guiding thread when searching for a professor for a particular school Here, the responsibility for the conscious shaping of the school's identity has to be taken seriously The research into the history of the school, a critical analysis of its values is necessary to identify those elements that still can support future education

Akos Moravanszky, Professor of History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture

I believe that we in design teaching here at MIT have consistently emphasized the relationship of the making of architectural form to several specific issues One is tectonics, which encompasses many aspects of technology Another is the land and nature, including considerations of site and context A third issue concerns culture, and the understanding of form in social and political terms In addition, attention has been focused on understanding client and user needs What unites these common concerns is care for the act and art of building, of assembling materials together, as a constructive approach to the process of designing. Design at MIT prefers form-making that is not formalistic, but that relates directly to human activity—habitable form is essential to creating joyful, livable places.

Over the years we have had a deep, at times painful, but sincere search to try to find different solutions to these issues without relying on fashions or fads of the day Formalistic style making is devoid of those aspects—considerations of materials, site and the housing of people—that are so important in making architecture a human art Commitment to this difficult search has made MIT unique from other schools of architecture

The teaching method in design has been labor intensive Although the faculty have had differences on the issues I have described, they have been united in a commitment to the education of students in the art of building We have taken care to help students understand basic principles, and at the same time to help them develop their own principles so they can begin to make decisions for themselves Most of the faculty have been engaged in some act of designing and building or applied research in addition to teaching so that the education is not "academic."

The challenge at this point is to make our agenda and our history clear outside these walls Also we have an incredible opportunity to strengthen our traditional concerns by integrating with other parts of the Institute which now could be at the forefront of environmentalism, I think it is paramount that architects continue to address the deteriorating conditions of the physical landscape (both natural and made-made) and the environment, that we enlarge rather than narrow our understanding of our role as custodians of the physical world, and that our teachings reflect this concern

Jan Wampler, Professor of Architecture

One of the strengths at MIT lays in its design professors who provide a system of beliefs about what is essential to design thinking These teachers use examples of architecture to demonstrate how that thinking is realized in built work In addition they structure exercises with clearly stated aims. These exercises are part of an agenda used by the instructor to convey a comprehensible attitude towards design In this way, teachers communicate a system of architectural knowledge which students may then apply in their own design explorations This approach to teaching makes a valuable contribution to a student's design education

Less than helpful is the teaching method also found at MIT where professors leave students to design by intuition. These teachers may suggest a set of considerations to use in approaching the problem, but do not offer any underlying principles that would make those suggestions relevant to the design process When the intentions of the studio are not explicit there is no common basis for design Students work independently and their projects are ultimately judged based on guidelines they have set for themselves, or guidelines imposed after the design is presented. In this type of studio the teacher's insights are not expressed until the evaluation stage It is difficult to synthesize the results of this type of studio because of the design investigation's lack of critical focus As a result, the student's design awareness is little furthered

Robin Allen McGrew, second year M.Arch student

The issue of change at our school has generally been misunderstood as one of natural evolution or progress Some like our Dean, offer platitudes such as "The 60s are over," "We must move on," etc to support their position Yet, the question of change has little to do with time or evolution Quite simply, it is about didactic reality

Despite the risk of over-simplification it seems possible to identify four didactic attitudes operating in the school at this time Two of these could be seen as characteristic of MIT in the recent past One is based on empirical observation of form phenomena It assumes that objective conditions of form can be identified, analyzed and understood Personal expression is seen as an artifact rather than a generator of the design process In this case the didactic core lies in teaching basic principles of form organization Another approach seeks to bring design and technology to bear on perceived conditions of need Sites and programs may be located in indigent areas Knowledge is tapped in seeking relatively low-tech solutions to problems of form planning building and infrastructure This attitude can be connected to issues of sustainability and social responsibility

Two other didactic positions might be described in the following manner One appears based on the notion that architecture is an art form As such the design project is based on conceptual/rhetorical constructs The subjective view or "gaze" is therefore often the core of the didactic The student is guided or coached toward a personal language, style, or conceptual position In this model critical thinking is not necessarily applied systematically to issues of use-form The fourth attitude (it can hardly be called a position) constitutes a trend toward hyper-tech and appears poised to take over the department Led by Dean Mitchell's bombastic ring-master salesmanship it may already be a fait accompli Typical of infatuations with fancy toys it applies the most advanced technology where it is needed least Useless "complex geometries," the oxymoron "virtual Agora," and the exploration of costly production techniques are all touted with little sign of critical rigor Yet these notions carry only the weakest connections to the salient issues of architecture and society in our time

Can these varying positions be balanced or reconciled? It would be unfortunate if our school lost its position as the intelligent alternative to self-serving hyper-technologies, stylistic tendencies, and conceptual architecture which continue to pervade the field The 60s may be over but so are the 80s. We must "move on" to reset architectural me-ism Let us instead emphasize the objective over the subjective and the collective over the personal We will always need faculty with critical theory founded on the study of form, light, materials, and the physical poetic/logic of building We will continue to need a program of study based on the empirical analysis of physical form and of its organization for use These issues are timeless No technology or conceptual construct will ever supercede experiential verification of the built form

Dan Gorini, third year M.Arch student

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The center is not holding It is more interesting at the edge

My impressions of the department of architecture are still forming having been here only a few months I have found myself seeing through a haze that seems to have formed sometime in the early seventies, clouding discussions about design, and now twenty years later, is still refusing to clear away No doubt it was a haze partially formed by external conditions, but it has lingered on too long in the studios of MIT The imminent tenured faculty appointment in architectural design must be a clear, bold stroke—a known entity in the field of architecture—to bring the department into current debates about design The recent appointment of three new studio faculty has challenged some assumptions about MIT's attitude towards design education It is this challenge, not the particularities of each new faculty member's position, that is important to us now The perceived tiredness of the studio faculty, and in turn the tiredness of the physical environment, are in need of a waking up.

The critical mass of the department of architecture is relatively small Therefore design, central to an education in architecture, should be given a pre-eminent position which it does not currently hold within the department This repositioning should be accomplished not through the appointment of figureheads but through a core of committed architects each with some recognizable body of work of their own The strengthened attitude towards design typified by the new curriculum must be met head on with responsive, visionary faculty who have strong notions about the field and what role this particular education will play in it The department sometimes seems complacent with its own anonymity, despite visible strengths in HTC, the Aga Khan program, the Media Lab, and MIT as an institution While it is certainly important to provide a forum for lesser heard voices (this can and is done through various ways in the department) the lecture series is one of those outward signs of what MIT is interested in discussing The appointment of new faculty is another But when very few signs are recognized, the school is perceived as mistrusting of the outside world of architecture—an insular, private body. Participating in public discourse about the field is a necessary and enriching step of education With regard to particular debates, there seems to be a general attitude in studios which equates theory with style and thus makes theory taboo Current debates about theory are a part of design—we read the journals we know the architects—and the relative merits of this can be discussed in the studio environment if there are professors who are willing and able to discuss it

Perhaps I invest too much in the meaning of this appointment Yet it is one of several transformations which the school is undergoing, at a time of great flux in the field as a whole The decisions we make have a public face, whether we choose to recognize it or not Outside critics, exhibits of student work, visiting professors, and bound, externally-circulated journal publications are other ways for the department to participate in the discourses about architectural design We need to get our work and ideas out there

Lia Kiladis, first year M.Arch. student

There is always a moment of change We must redefine an understanding of our present Continuity comes from our own understanding of reality as a state of constant change and permanent redefinition The perception and experience of this mutation reveals to ourselves our own continuity The question of continuity then becomes one of maintaining an awareness about quality and values Continuity is not an abstract concept, there is a direct relationship between the people who teach and their interpretation of reality There is no continuity to maintain when ideas are fixed in a stereotyped manner What must be maintained is the quality of thinking, teaching, and viewing of architecture I am not concerned with continuity so much as with the preservation of quality

In every time period architectural educators have attempted a classification of thinking as part of the academic method This process of fixation—whether it be through intellectual systems, historical interpretations, or other means—separates the thinking about architecture from the work itself When this happens architectural education fails in the task of understanding the direct connections of architecture as the reality of construction We perceive things, understand them, feel them, and only then are we able to begin to explain them When we explain, we may lose the original perception, but as the process is cyclical the original perception will then reappear But the academy challenges the dynamism of this cycle by its need to intellectualize and explain things If students are not trained to be alert to all phases of this cycle, they will never understand the necessary total spectrum of perception, contact with reality, capacity of judgment, of emotion, of decision and of explanation Only with this understanding may they approach synthetic vision and the capacity for making physical proposals.

In the first decade there has been an increase in architectural discourse that removes from the discussion humanistic concerns and regard for the physical presence of architecture. At the same time there has been an attempt to systematize thinking and emotions with the introduction of advanced technologies Students must be taught the capacity to address the possible dehumanizing effects of these new intellectual and technological devices In addition, the effect facts of physical building on nature and on the perception of human beings must be understood Otherwise we will teach about lines, concepts, metaphors or words, and not about fundamental architectural experiences As a result, the question facing the student may no longer be the "what, where, and how" of the physics of architecture grounded in culture. This task is not an easy one, the more sophisticated the machines, the more knowledge we will have to have

Fernando Domeyko, Lecturer, Department of Architecture

PROPENSITIES (continued from p. 1)

architectural complex or building In that sense, my claim is general We can take an interest in any such field and examine how the physical environment performs Through such inquiries, we will find that some environments perform well and others not, that some (perhaps even by establishing constraints) provide direction and positive support within the field of propensities while others do not; that some are adaptable while others are not, that some are adaptable merely by reinterpretation while others require physical change

I find Schwarzwald of particular interest in that I think the characteristics of its plan—especially its high degree of differentiation within a repetitive and cognizable plan—has performed well. The Savannah plan has responded to changing propensities with a minimum of disruption to other conditions that, at a given moment, were stable And it has done this largely through a capacity for reinterpretation rather than through costly physical transformations [2]

These conjectures are directed to an issue mentioned earlier How can we understand architecture in relation to society without falling into either social or architectural determinism—or into an evasion through the claim for the autonomy of architecture? Under the notion of a field of propensities, as illustrated by the example of Savannah, one observes that societies establish many and changing propensities Some of these stem from social organization itself, but others are significantly related to the physical environment

A plan such as that of Savannah does not emerge as the solution to a set of well stated desiderata It is not an instance of technical problem-solving It is an invention within the quasi-autonomous domain of architecture and environmental planning There is a high degree of arbitrariness that it should have been this plan that was set down on that bluff on the frontier of English settlement in America It could have been otherwise Architecture could always have been otherwise But I also said "quasi-autonomy" And I said "high degree of arbitrariness" The planners of Savannah were neither unknowing as to the social ends sought by the Trustees of Georgia, nor careless in their choices within the domain of environmental planning This was not to be a garrison town under central authority that would have encouraged a centralized, hierarchical plan This was a long-term investment in what was intended to be a community of citizen-farmers A high percentage of the site was reserved for communal interests and use The individual citizen-farmers received the inducement of their own town garden and farm lots But as a community, it was important that these lots be, as much as possible, equal to one another physically, just as a rule against alienation of land sought to maintain that equality The multi-focal organization of the town served at least two intentions in diminishing the sense of center and periphery, the assignment of lots remained more equal over time and space, simultaneously, the multiple centers and trust lots encouraged a distribution of services and institutions rather than the dominance of one or a few

I claim that the partially arbitrary phenomenon of architecture while not determining the field of propensities, can both stimulate and support elements of that field We may understand architecture as having a partially arbitrary quasi-autonomous domain of its own, a realm both of tradition and of invention, that is neither determined nor determining yet is one significant element within what I am calling the field of propensities Architecture matters

Beyond the example of Savannah, there is architecture that takes the people-environment relation seriously Consider the work of such architects as Wright, Aalto, Asplund, Lewerentz, Duiker, Scharoun, Schindler, Wurster, Scarpa and others While any situation, and thus any architecture can be analyzed in terms of propensities, it is such architecture concerned with situations that best resists criticism within such an analysis If Savannah may provide an example of environment as a "field of propensities," I think the thought and the work of the architects I just cited might also be contributively seen in this light

The interpretation of Savannah is one I made many years ago Recently Karl Popper published a small book *A World of Propensities* which provided the word "propensity" and a sense of confirmation in the larger implications of this form of analysis in "people-environment studies" This epistemological tradition[3] recognizes that each of us must constantly take positions that imply larger commitments We must make conjectures on which to act even as we examine and question them In line with the epistemology I am a fallibist We have no certain knowledge We can only make bold conjectures We must examine these guesses, and learn through trial and error. And precisely because there is no definitive truth, nor even a definitive failure, we must welcome competing conjectures

I think it is a misfortune that we too often induce fear of error. Holding some things dear, we do not always encourage conjecture Concerned with being correct, we may stifle invention Thus in my 1981 "inaugural" as Head of this Department, I offered a "fallibist manifesto" and a general conjecture on architecture and propensities—aimed at encouraging daring within the arbitrary but also a realistic reckoning within the field of propensities. These efforts are themselves not yet fully developed, criticized and reconfigured, but may provoke and provoke interim points of orientation ■

1 Stanford Anderson, "Savannah and the Issue of Precedent City Plan as Resource," in Ralph Bennett, ed, *Settlements in the Americas. Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Newark, DE. University of Delaware Press, 1993), pp 110–144

2 The erosion of such a policy also in other conditions and with a different plan, have been demonstrated in the city of Curitiba, Brazil—as presented by Mayor Jaime Lerner in our Schein Lecture of 1993

3 Karl Popper, *A World of Propensities* (Bristol Thoemmes, 1990) Paul Feyerabend first my interest in the philosophy of science—first the thought of his own teacher Karl Popper and then his own work and that of his friend and competitor, Imre Lakatos It is Lakatos who has been most directly influential on my work.

A-IORM-ISMS (continued from p. 3)

similarities between the concepts presented in Charles Olson's poetic manifesto and elements of Smith's theory, such as Olson's concept of "composition by field," his belief in the simultaneity of form and content, his refusal to use a pre-existing form, his distaste for hierarchy abstract language, and rational discourse over direct experience, his insistence on continuity, and his stance against history and time Smith does assign mentorship to György Kepes, and specifically his ideas of "ongoing light and space" and his attitudes of color that come from the landscape The landscape Smith indicates is also an important source for his theory Neither heritage is mentioned in "Fragments" and Smith acknowledges that the connection to Kepes "would take time to see " But one can see that the landscape and Kepes' notions of ongoing light and space could form the basis of Smith's attack against "bad control systems," or what he calls forms of central control He claims that this type of order started in the Renaissance and promoted the isolated object instead of the range of relationships and systems of organization that are found in the landscape where the final order is one all several systems

Maurice Cheery is indeed complex and access to meaning is not through "Fragments" or any other written text Although the appositive structure—collaged and non-linear form of his a-form-isms—allows for multiple readings, there is only one way to understand what he is trying to convey—and that is through Maurice He does have an intense impulse, mediated by the contentious gesticulations of a stock, to talk about form Those that have experienced Smith's didactic method of teaching gain access to this knowledge It is a system which inevitably produces a fraternity which despite the diversity created within the school is a process which prevents dialogue or exchange Viewed in this light it is an approach that can be read as being concerned with its own formal purity Maurice's enterprise is a closed field conceptual consistency

Maurice Smith's writings are as difficult to understand as the person behind them His manner is prickly, he claims to be without attachment or ego about the reception of his ideas, and has a forceful way of speaking that is not for the faint hearted. However, his conduct and affirmations are belayed by a depth of concern and a conviction about form-making that is seldom encountered in educators or architects Smith's writings are easily misunderstood and misleading if one assumes that they are produced to explain and disseminate his thinking yet, as a fragment they also expose a complex, revealing and revolutionary way of thinking about form Although the integrity of Maurice's writing and his pedagogical approach is unquestionable, the unfortunate aspect is that the particularities of his theory can only be known by passing through the gate ■

1 The reason that "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" is one of four "dogmas" stated by Charles Olson in *Projective Verse*

BUILT COLLAGE (continued from p. 3)

concrete column supporting a wooden deck does not end abruptly but continues through the deck, becoming a post to lean against.

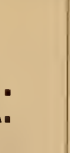
In his use of an architecture composed largely of quotations (re-used material), Smith subverts the traditional authority of authorship The presence of the architect as organizer is evident in the selection and activation of the quoted material But his presence does not rely solely on singular narratives of complete geometry, axis or structured linear sequence Instead, architectural order is brought about by emphasizing a certain orientation that all material systems respond to The coherence and cadence of the entire experience results from alternations of the built and unbuilt, by a reciprocity of inside and outside (in both plan and section), by intensification using space and light, and by the repetition of certain dimensions

The result is that no one narrative sequence exists, each experience is generated by the movement of the observer through time and space Because of the systematic use of the component materials, each territory of the house is packed with experience, none in itself providing the culmination or beginning of a sequence Each territorial definition is incomplete, the only complete closures are "privacies" or "stops " Intensities of experience within the larger spatial flow of the house arise from multiple routes of movement through the levels, views at every turn, shifting levels that both shelter and create a larger sense of the section The exclusive narrative of traditional artistic composition is replaced by a multiplicity of localized anecdotes This construction of a multiple narrative denies the soothing possibility of an attainable utopia or a return to a fixed authoritarian past.

Ultimately Smith rejects the sole reliance on form as the bearer of meaning in favor of meaning generated by the observer's interaction with a "built collage" world A world whose hybrid nature produces within it the potential for multiple meanings While the architect still has to make formal decisions about the building, it is conceived not as a closed single entity but as the on-going product of its component material systems Thus, the generation of form is a by-product of Smith's architecture, not its primary objective

This shift away from the design of complete objects to more open-ended structures of multiple signification may be understood as the continuation of a modernist attempt to find a mode of creative production that closes the distance between art and the observer Smith's architecture replaces iconic with systemic meaning in which the observer assembles meaning out of his/her experience of the building's multiple systems Smith's built collage can be seen as a political act of inclusion that gives both architect and user the freedom to operate The act of collage is liberating in that it incorporates artifacts from the everyday world at will and transforms these quotations through their arrangement thereby positing numerous alternative realities ■

1 For an analysis of the politics of collage see Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," October 30 (Fall 1984)



"If you don't like the tempest, get out of the teapot"

CODA:

From Edward Koren, "Well there's your problem" (Pantheon Books New York, 1980)